

Cycles of Abuse in Suburban America in *Poltergeist*

by

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“Come and play with us. Come and play with us...forever...and ever...and ever” (Kubrick, *The Shining*). Within *The Shining*, a father brings violence to his own familial unit through abusing his son, who develops an alternative persona as a coping mechanism. The abuse from the father stems from sexual abuse from his own parents, thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle of abusers. As this warning from the past cautions, this abuse continues in every generation throughout history: forever and ever. Similarly, in *Poltergeist*, a family suffers for denying their personal and societal histories of abuse, instead focusing on materialistic concerns that cover up the skeletons in their closet. Throughout this film, Tobe Hooper utilizes technical elements such as visual matches, framing, and mise-en-scène in general to stress that the suburban culture of materialism generates a dissatisfaction with life, often yielding abuse within the modern familial unit which in turn crafts a historic cycle of abuse that must undergo recognition in order for the family to unify. This indicates that, with the Cold War coming to a close in the eighties, suburban fears began to revolve around violence within the household rather than an external threat.

With the growing culture of consumerism during this time period, materialism began to threaten the familial unit, creating a general dissatisfaction with life. Hooper expresses this materialistic emphasis through depicting the television as the modern hearth, choosing objects as the forces that literally attack the family, and using framing to connect the viewer to the ground, indicating that these individuals attempt to cover up the emptiness of their lives with material possessions. To begin, the initiating action of the film involves the national anthem playing on a close-up of a television just prior to a sequence of shots that function to both spatially orient the audience and tie the family members together (00:00:00-00:02:58). Moving from the television

to each family member, the camera connects the family to each other and to the television itself. However, this lack of true connection is immediately evident in the first shot of the sequence, in which the television turns from an image of soldiers putting up a flag together, a symbol of unity, to static as the camera pushes back, revealing a drunk father who sleeps completely separate from his family, ironically showing a lack of unity. In a later shot, the father discusses business with his boss, specifically the removal of a sacred Indian burial ground to make way for housing (01:10:45-01:12:00). The significance lies in the fact that no horizon line exists in this shot, as the distant hills cover the sky. Suburbia exists as far as the eye can see. No spiritual values remain in this society, and the houses consume the heavens just as materialism consumes meaning in the lives of these individuals.

Furthermore, this general dissatisfaction with life as a result of materialism often leads to abuse within the familial unit, as individuals seek to exert agency over their lives via any method available. The presence of the abuse within the household in *Poltergeist* comprises a hidden narrative in the film, shown by the inclusion of half-lit faces, phallic imagery, and visual matches between the father and a monster, providing evidence that the sexual abuse stems from the materialistic, emotionally empty father. This effectively reverses the traditional role of the father as a protector, indicating that the societal changes of the eighties brought about a more cynical outlook on life. When the indigenous mystic speaks to the family, a close-up of the father reveals that his half-lit face (01:20:33). In addition to suggesting a double identity, this parallels a later image in which a clown attacks the son (01:39:39). The face of the clown changes from a pleasant smile to a sadistic grin, similar to the role of the father as an abuser, behind his facade. As the family demonstrates instances of the supernatural in their home, they enter a room in

which objects float about, with a lamp and bulb sexually connecting in front of them (00:45:14-00:45:28). This phallic symbol provides evidence that the abuse took place within that room, and a later scene in which a tentacle attacks from within the closet confirms the sexual abuse theme (01:45:40-01:45:43). In the climax of the second act, the father faces a monster that emerges from the closet (01:31:01-1:31:09). Both open their mouths to scream, with an extreme close-up on the father's mouth to emphasize this connection. Many shots in this brief sequence capture the screaming father from varying angles, connecting to that father's various roles: husband and abuser.

As a result of abuse from within the familial units, the victims often unconsciously seek to reassert power over others later in life and thus become abusers, breeding a vicious cycle of abuse. Although this film solely covers one iteration of this cycle, Hooper encodes indicators such as recurring symbols, circular framing, and the literal rise of skeletons, which foreshadow the repetition of this abuse, indicating that abuse begets abusers, causing a repetition of abuse throughout history. One example of a recurring symbol would be the yellow bicycle, which falls over at the beginning of the film (00:06:50). After the return of their daughter, the father jostles past the same bicycle, knocking it over and drawing the audience's attention to the symbol (01:33:55). This foreshadows that the abuse, or haunting, is not over, unconsciously influencing the expectations of the audience as to the final act. Similar circular framing of the son also signals the cyclical nature of the film, as towards the beginning, a tree branch circles him in the frame and later the clown's hat circles him (00:12:39, 01:37:48). Towards the end of the film, skeletons literally rise up to encircle the mother, trapping her, an innocent, in the cycle of abuse (01:42:40-01:43:10). This also symbolizes the rising of the skeletons in the closet of the family:

the perpetration of sexual abuse by the father. These Native American skeletons are victims due to their genocide and the recent displacement of their burial ground, and now they become the abusers by attacking the household, further exemplifying the prevalence of this cycle of abuse.

While this intergenerational cycle of abuse breeds both victims and victimizers, the possibility of breaking out of this cycle remains feasible with the recognition of the abuse, as dealing with reality rather than embracing constructions allows for a direct confrontation with the solution to freedom from the cycle. Throughout the film, Hooper emphasizes human contact with close-ups while rejecting artificiality, arguing that the resolution of this cycle of abuse within the suburban nuclear family relies upon a disconnection from material concerns, which indicates that superficial concerns only provide a mask over internal abuse. Immediately after the return of their daughter, the mother shows grey hair, demonstrating her willingness to embrace reality and understand the past (01:33:50). However, she quickly attempts to dye her hair again, walking into a room full of mirrors, reminiscent of the room in which a man thought his face was melting (01:35:55-01:36:00). Thus, the cycle repeats and the audience understands that the film is not over. In one of the final scenes, the mother, daughter, and son all join hands and escape from an attacking phallic tentacle from the closet (01:45:22-01:45:32). The portrayal of the interlocking hands in close-up emphasizes their newfound unity, although the father is noticeably absent. They fling themselves outside of the room, which symbolizes their freedom from this cycle of abuse. In the closing shot, the entire family retreats to a motel room, draws the curtains, and expels the television, symbolically rejecting artificiality by removing the mechanical hearth (01:50:00-01:51:45). The camera backs up past a row of identical motel rooms, which signals that this problem is not an isolated incident, but rather a societal problem.

In conclusion, Hooper incorporates visuals and cinematography techniques to argue that a dissatisfaction with life, brought on by the suburban culture of materialism, causes abuse to arise as a method of taking control of life, inciting a cycle of violence that can only be broken by the reunification of the familial unit. This indicates that societal fears within the eighties held a particular focus on familial conflict, as the decline of the Cold War during this period led to a lower level of anxiety regarding foreign threats. Throughout the eighties, horror began to finalize its revolution from being equivalent to thrillers to becoming supposedly less intelligent and lower quality films. However, horror is a remarkable genre due to its ability to document the fears of society at a given time period. For example, within the eighties slasher subgenre, killers punish those engaging in premarital intercourse, reflecting an emphasis on familial unity and conservative values. *Poltergeist* stands out due to its reflection of the fear of a betrayal from within the family, while most other horror films from the eighties played upon other concerns. With the solidification of suburbia, numerous families felt securely situated, their greatest fear being the internal implosion within *Poltergeist*. Thus, *Poltergeist* models the fears of a new group of individuals in a new society, the fear that society will breakdown from within each family.

Works Cited

Poltergeist. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Perf. JoBeth Williams and Craig Nelson. United Artists, 1982.

The Shining. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Jack Nicholson and Shelly Duvall. Warner Bros., 1980.